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ABSTRACT

This paper overviews the development of American Indian tribal colleges and identifies effective leadership strategies that have maintained the viability of these institutions. The first tribal college--Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona--was established in 1968. Other landmarks in the development of tribal colleges include creation of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC), passage of the Tribally Controlled Community Assistance Act, creation of the American Indian College Fund, and extension of land-grant status to tribal colleges. Currently there are 31 tribal colleges that are members of AIHEC, serving American Indian students in 12 states and 2 Canadian provinces. The mission of tribal colleges is to focus on individual student development as well as to "preserve, enhance, promote, and teach" tribal culture and language. Tribal colleges attempt to meet the diverse needs of their student population through various student support services. Despite the success of tribal colleges, a need exists to increase the number of Native American faculty and administrators. Administrators of tribal colleges face many problems: lack of proper funding and facilities; faculty recruitment and retention; and student concerns involving financial, transportation, and child care needs. In order to address these concerns, college leaders must maintain a close relationship with their communities; be knowledgeable about local culture; and demonstrate appropriate leadership qualities, including wisdom and spirituality. The future viability of tribal colleges necessitates that tribal college leaders seek university status, which will open additional avenues for federal funding and program development. (LP)

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Running Head: TRIBAL COLLEGES

Tribal Colleges: A Study of Development, Mission, and Leadership

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> *"Tribal colleges are, deliberately, institutions that bridge two worlds. They are built on a foundation of tribal culture and values, but teach the knowledge of both Indian and non-Indian communities. In this way they are cultural translators, sitting on the fulcrum between two very distinct societies" (p.15).*
>
> *Boyer, Paul. (Summer 1995). "Tribal College of the Future." Tribal College Journal, VII (1), 8-17,45.*

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide information on the developmental background of American Indian Tribal Colleges, to explain their mission, to discuss the populations they serve, and to establish the significance of appropriate leadership styles and behaviors in maintaining the viability of those colleges.

Establishing the Colleges

Tribal colleges are relatively new institutions, the first having begun in 1968 with the creation of Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona. Believing that education was a treaty right and part of the federal trust relationship, the Navajo, with the help of their congressman, wrote and sponsored The Navajo Community College Act, P.L. 92-189. This act laid the foundation for much of what has followed in the development of other tribal colleges (Stein, 1990). In 1972, six tribally-controlled community colleges founded The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) to begin "a concerted effort for the developmental problems common to them all" and "dedicated to the growth and development of all American Indian Higher Education Institutions" (AIHEC, WWW).

In 1978 Congress passed P.L. 95-471, the Tribally Controlled Community College Assistance Act. Signed into law by President Carter and reauthorized as P.L. 98-192 in 1983, this act helped to stabilize tribal colleges (Stein, 1990). The funding

for beginning tribal colleges was sparse and some began as "job training centers, not as full fledged colleges with an academic curriculum" while others began as "extension centers" of non-Indian colleges or universities and "satellite institutions offering only a limited range of courses" (Boyer, 1995). Other tribal colleges were able to establish agreements with established state institutions (e.g. Turtle Mountain Community College and Standing Rock College, ND; Fort Peck Community College, MT; Oglala Lakota College, SD) to begin offering courses (Carnegie, 1989). This connection with established bachelor degree granting institutions was essential because tribal colleges as two-year schools could not qualify on their own for federal research grants limited to four year colleges (*Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 12-17-95). The American Indian College Fund (AICF) was "launched in 1989 to raise funds from the private sector to support" the tribal colleges, and has provided a vehicle to secure funding for monetary support as well as to raise an "awareness of the success of tribally controlled education" (AIHEC, WWW). Although federal funding has never reached authorized levels (Stein, 1990), some additional funding has been made available through the Ford, Bush, Donner, MacArthur, Pew, and US West Foundations (Stein, 1990; Boyer, 1995).

In 1994, Congress granted land-grant status to tribal colleges (Boyer, 1995) and designated $4.6 million in the first installment toward building a $23 million endowment; $1.45 million was designated to develop courses immediately (*Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 12-17-95). Indian educators view land-grant status as a move that will help them improve courses and remove some of the limitations imposed by limited resources (*Sioux Falls Argus Leader*, 12-17-95).

Today there are thirty-one members in the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, serving American Indian students in twelve state and two

Canadian provinces. Three institutions offer master's degrees; six offer bachelor's degrees; twenty-nine offer associate degrees; and two offer vocational certificates (Slater & O'Donnell, 1995). Degree programs include business, liberal studies, protective services, education, Native American studies, and computer science. Vocational certification programs include business, construction trades, computer, health, and education (Slater & O'Donnell, 1995).

The Tribal College Mission

Cajete (1994) in *Look to the Mountain* states that tribal education is really "endogenous education, in that it educates the inner self through enlivenment and illumination from one's own being and the learning of key relationships" (p.34). He characterizes a basic element of Indian Education as the recognition that "each person and each culture contains the seeds that are essential to their well-being and positive development" (Cajete, 1994, p.29). Focusing on the development of the individual, tribal colleges "maintain a strong focus on the cultural heritage of the local people" (Conti & Fellenz, 1991) with an aim of "human resource development for the tribe" (Cross & Shortman, 1995).

Tribal colleges are "flexible and responsive institutions" that "promote the self-determination aspiration of Indian people" (Boyer, 1995), and draw on tribal history and culture as they "strive to integrate traditional disciplinary knowledge of mainstream society into their academic programs" (Badwound & Tierney, 1988, p.14). Tribal culture is central to Indian Education and provides the basic element in establishing the tribal college mission. Each tribal college's mission statement clearly states that it will "preserve, enhance, promote, and teach" its tribe's culture and language. This common element ensures that students will have an opportunity to learn more about their tribe's culture and history with an aim to

building their identity and instilling pride in their heritage (Stein, 1992).

This commitment to reclaim cultural heritage undergirds the mission of the tribal colleges that is reinforced through the framework for their curriculums. A "commitment to reaffirm traditions" (Boyer in *Carnegie*, 1989) and the focus on "incorporating culture into the curriculum is imperative if tribal colleges are to meet their stated goals" (Cross & Shortman, 1995, p. 34). This framework is more than a desire to "add elements of native thought and philosophy" to their curriculums; tribal colleges "want their curriculum[s] to be as fully reflective of their culture as Harvard is of western culture" (Boyer, 1995, p. 45).

The task of incorporating culture into tribal college curriculums is a difficult one. Cross & Shortman (1995) explain: "The reality is that incorporating culture into the curriculum is a formidable task given that most tribal colleges must first develop the materials about their own cultures" (p.35). Not only must these tribal colleges develop materials, they must also "define what, exactly, contemporary American Indian culture should like" (Boyer, 1995, p.45). As summarized by Conti & Fellenz (1991), ". . . no situation factor is more important at tribal colleges than the philosophy of the institution. Tribal colleges have a definitive mission and a community responsibility. This must be reflected in the curriculum and in the way the curriculum is formulated" (p.22).

Tribal colleges strive to advance the understanding of Indian culture. Their curriculums "work to express evidence of culture--through ceremonies and the teaching of language, for example--even on reservations where the culture is almost lost and few, if any, members speak the language fluently. In this way, they are bringing the active expression of culture back to life, making it the common currency of the tribe once more" (Boyer, 1995, p.45). The tangible evidence of culture

is in the pow wows and native study courses, but the intangible influence of culture is "carefully embedded throughout the entire curriculum, in the philosophy of teaching and the general mood of the institution" (Boyer, 1995, p.16).

Tribal colleges strive to provide culturally relevant content that will reinforce the basic values of the community. Their goals "are neither competitive nor meritocratic....generosity, reverence for the earth, and wisdom are basic values" (McNickle, 1973, in Badwound & Tierney, 1988) that connect tribal college education with cultural philosophy. Although tribal college education supports development of the individual, the goals reflect group interests (Badwound & Tierney, 1988) and work toward the development of the community. They are "truly *community* institutions...building new communities based on shared traditions ...challenging the conditions that plague their societies and continue to threaten their survival" (Boyer in Carnegie, 1989, p.xii). Tribal colleges continually examine their missions in the context of what it will mean for their communities. Each undertaking is evaluated in term of consistency with mission and appropriateness for the community. The relationships of tribal colleges and communities are reciprocal. Just as states rely on their higher education institutions as "repositories of knowledge...so too do tribal communities look to their colleges for information and guidance" (Boyer, 1995, p.14).

Tribal College Students and Faculty:

American Indian students within the tribal college system do not fit what is considered to be the "typical" pattern of student demographics. "[O]lder, predominately female, students" fill the classrooms of the tribal colleges in their early stages of existence; some colleges have a female student population as high as 70% or more (Boyer, 1995). The 1989 Carnegie report on

tribal colleges reported that Fort Berthold College in North Dakota had an average student age of 33; students at Little Hoop Community College in Montana averaged 29 years of age. Students at Turtle Mountain Community College in North Dakota were 68 percent women, 85 percent with children (Carnegie, 1989). The average student age decreases as the backlog of older students works their way through the system, but many of the students are single parents, students who return to school after failures in other institutions. Most tribal colleges offer adult basic education (ABE) or graduate equivalency degree (GED) programs because of the large number of students who lack high school diplomas (Conti & Fellenz, 1991).

Students at tribal colleges represent groups with special needs that include childcare, transportation, financing, and emotional and academic support. Several colleges have responded to these needs by providing child care, college-sponsored transportation, financial assistance through grants (where available), individual counseling, and student support groups (Stein, 1992).

Tribal colleges offer their students the caring, family atmosphere that is central to their success in higher education. They "provide a nurturing, personalized atmosphere with an understanding of the cultural and social needs" of these students (Campobasso, 1995). The colleges become students' extended families and instructors help create the "physical and psychological climate that makes the learner feel comfortable, accepted and respected" (Conti & Fellenz, 1991, p.19).

Many American Indian students who attend secondary schools do not aspire to higher education. According to the National Center for Education

Statistics, "the percentage of students who apply to college are lower in schools with high percentages of Indian students than at public schools with low Indian student enrollment" (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1995, p.25). The implication is that Indian students are much less likely to apply for college admission, at least to mainstream higher education institutions, than are other students in those secondary schools, a factor influenced by the low numbers of American Indians in teaching institutions. Figures from NCES further indicate that teachers of American Indian / Alaska Native ancestry constitute only 16 percent of the teaching staff in public schools with a high Indian student enrollment, and only 38 percent in BIA / tribal schools (NCES, 1995).

American Indian higher education role models are also in short supply. A study of twenty-one tribal colleges by Cross and Shortman revealed that while the gender ratio of faculty was almost equal, 67% were non-Indian and 60% were new to teaching in a tribal college with only one to five years of experience. This confirms their assertion that there is a "need for more enrolled tribal members and other Native to become tribal college faculty in order to provide role models for Native tribal college students and to develop the tribe's human resources" (Cross & Shortman, 1995, p.34). Clearly, if tribal colleges are to increase the numbers of American Indian faculty members, the number of role models at all levels of education must be increased.

According to Cross and Shortman, "because the majority of teachers are [non-]Native, and the number of Native college faculty will not increase in the very near future, the need to increase the faculty's knowledge of Native education is crucial" (1995, p.35). Teachers who lack knowledge about the

tribes served by the college must be provided with opportunities and equipped with the skills necessary to acquire that knowledge. In some cases, students themselves can be both the source of and motivation for this knowledge. "Of all the determinants that motivate the faculty, administrators, and staff in the tribal colleges, the single most important element is the students" (Stein, 1992, p.89).

Tribal College Leadership

Kouzes and Posner (1987) in *The Leadership Challenge* assert,

> Leaders look forward to the future. They hold in their minds vision and ideals of what can be. They have a sense of what is uniquely possible if all work together for a common purpose. . . .
>
> . . . Leaders breathe life into visions. They communicate their hopes and dreams so that others clearly understand and accept them as their own. They show others how their values and interests will be served by the long-term vision of the future (p.79).

Tribal colleges have for the past decade and a half provided educational opportunities that have far surpassed the expectations of many. It would be difficult to deny that the founders and leaders of these institutions, along with faculty and community members, possessed great vision and utilized tribal values and interests to help realize the hopes and dreams of their students. It would be impossible to negate the importance of quality leadership in the founding and continued development of tribal colleges.

According to information gathered by the Carnegie Foundation,

> In the early years the tribal college presidents were frequently people committed to tribal development but with little experience running a college. They tended to view the tribal colleges as tools to help provide economic and social parity with the Anglo community. Increasingly, presidents today are

> strong leaders with a background in education or administration (Carnegie, 1989, p.32).

The majority of today's tribal college presidents are Native Americans and one-third are women (AIHEC, WWW).

The leader of a tribal colleges faces problems that include lack of proper funding and facilities; recruitment and retention of faculty (both Indian and non-Indian); student concerns that encompass financial, transportation, childcare needs; inadequate educational preparation; and in many cases, problems beyond their control caused by the environment and weather conditions. Tribal college leaders must establish communications with their communities and be knowledgeable of the local culture to ensure that the focus of the institution remains centered on the mission. Badwound and Tierney explain,

> The leader in the tribal college is a facilitator and promoter of group values and interest. Instead of maintaining autocratic power by virtue of position, the tribal college leader develops authority by demonstrating competence and allegiance to the values which underlie the organization (1988, p.13).

To gain the respect of constituents, tribal college leaders must demonstrate appropriate leadership qualities, including wisdom and spirituality. Wisdom is demonstrated by following Indian values and possessing visionary qualities of leadership; spirituality is demonstrated by sustaining Indian culture and providing leadership that empowers Indian societies to endure (Badwound & Tierney, 1988, p.12). The vision of tribal colleges leaders puts students first, balancing the needs of the community with the needs of the individual, grounding those needs in the wisdom of the past, the knowledge of the

present, and the hope for a better future.

The Future of Tribal Colleges

> Tribal colleges were once among the most isolated institutions of higher education. But this isolation has made them reach out to each other, and encouraged the construction of bridges through telecommunications, publishing and national conferences. In time, they may be the least isolated colleges in the country (Boyer, 1995, p.17).

Tribal colleges have grown rapidly in number, program offerings, and student enrollments since their beginnings in the late 1960's. Their diverse compositions suggest that in the future it will become even more difficult to describe a "typical" Indian college. However, the tribal college mission will remain the same; the vision of affirming traditional culture will endure. The trends that will direct the future of tribal colleges will include collaboration among themselves and affirmation of traditional culture. "[E]very college was created to sustain each tribe's heritage. But it will explore its mandate in exciting new ways. It will not only teach and reflect the culture throughout the curriculum, it will interpret and redefine culture to meet modern needs" (Boyer, 1995, pp.17 & 45).

More tribal colleges will seek to gain university status, opening additional avenues for federal funding and the development of terminal degree programs. A self-accreditation agency "sensitive to the unique skills, values and needs of tribal colleges" could provide more appropriate standards of measurement to validate credibility of programs (Boyer, 1995, p.17). "The tribal college of the next millennium will meet the learning, research and service needs of Indian reservations and students at the level it chooses" (Slater & O'Donnell, 1995, p.41).

As a model for higher education, tribal colleges can provide non-Indian colleges and universities with information on how they can better meet the needs of Indian students (Boyer, 1995, p.45). Tribal colleges provide lessons on perseverance, endurance, determination, and hope. They model the tenacity critical to the creation of a vision and the realization of a dream.

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